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100 QUESTIONS

WORKINGMEN MAKE INQUIRIES OF
GOV. ALTGELD

ON PRISON LABOR

QUERIES

BASED ON KNOWN FACTS WHICH SHOULD RECEIVE THE
CAREFUL ATTENTION OF

LABOR UNIONS



ILLINOIS HISTORICAL SURVEY

THEY QUESTION ALTGELD.

Workingmen Ask the Governor to Explain About Prison Labor—Great Growth of Convict Trade.

Seven workingmen of Chicago, representing a like number of trades, have addressed a series of questions to the governor of Illinois, concerning the convict labor system in the state penitentiaries, under which, it is claimed, competition between this class of labor and free labor has greatly increased. The letter is as follows:

“John P. Altgeld, Governor State of Illinois:

“Is it not a fact, Gov. Altgeld, that you in your canvass in 1892 insisted that if elected you would destroy the then existing competition between the product of convict labor in Joliet and the product of the free labor of the wageworkers of Illinois?

“Has the product of the convict labor in Joliet not increased fourfold during your administration?

“Did you not secure appropriations from the legislature appropriating nearly \$750,000 for the purchase of high-class machinery for Joliet prison?

“Did not this immense plant of latest invented machinery enormously increase the output of product of convict labor in Joliet prison?

“Was not this enormous expenditure for machinery made at your suggestion, and was it not expended by you in person?

Enormous Output of Cigars.

“Is it not a fact that there are forty-five convicts in Joliet prison using improved machinery in making cigars? Is not the task of each one of these convicts 1,100 a day, and does not this aggregate over 45,000 cigars a day?

“Does not this enormous output of convict-made cigars come in direct competition with free labor, depriving hundreds of honest cigarmakers from making a living?

“Does not this enormous output of penitentiary made cigars result in a depreciation of the price of cigars in general, thereby depriving honest workmen from earning a livelihood and driving cigar manufacturers out of the business?”

“Is it not a fact, Gov. Altgeld, that you introduced cigarmaking into the Joliet penitentiary, when cigars had never been made there before?”

“How have you benefited the cigarmaking industry by reducing it to the level of penitentiary products?”

“Governor, what is the number of your convict cigar manufactory in Joliet prison? Is it factory No. 71?”

“Kindly state the favorite brands of penitentiary cigars made in Joliet prison.”

“Will you please inform us how and where you dispose of your millions of convict-made cigars?”

“What is the total value per annum of your penitentiary-made cigars?”

Harnessmaking and Saddlery.

“Gov. Altgeld, is it not a fact that over one hundred men are engaged in the manufacture of harness and saddlery?”

“Is not the aggregate product of your penitentiary harness and saddlery factory worth over \$1,000,000 annually?”

“Has your convict harness and saddlery factory not driven hundreds of honest harnessmakers and saddlery-makers out of the trade and many manufacturers out of the business?”

“Has not the product of harness and saddlery increased three-fold since you became manager *de facto* of the busiest manufacturing establishment in the state of Illinois—*i. e.*, the Joliet penitentiary?”

“Will you vouchsafe to inform the thousands of unemployed harnessmakers of Illinois where you dispose of the \$1,000,000 product of penitentiary made harness and saddlery?”

“Will you inform an interested public why your convict made product is sold surreptitiously and no general accounting given the taxpaying public?”

As to Broommaking.

“Do you not know, your Excellency, that since time immemorial the trade of broommaking has been left largely to the blind men and women who were compelled to be self-supporting?

“Is it not a fact that your convict broom factory produces over \$200,000 worth of what charitable people have always considered the legitimate product of those bereft of sight?

“Has not the product of your broom factory deprived hundreds of the pitifully blind of the chance to earn even a meager livelihood?

“Does not your system of ‘anti-contract convict labor,’ so much talked of and written about by your honored self in theory, and so sadly neglected in practice, even include the degradation of those upon whom the Almighty has placed the worst burden which man can bear, viz., the loss of vision; or do you perhaps believe that the masses of self-respecting, free, and honest citizens are blind politically?

“Will you favor the people of Illinois with a statement showing expenditures and receipts of your broom factory in Joliet penitentiary?

“Will you kindly inform an anxious public where you dispose of the product of your broom factory, and just why that product is stealthily placed on the market after the historic manner attributed to smugglers?

Wagon Building and Repairs.

“Is it not a fact, Gov. Altgeld, that your great industrial enterprise at Joliet does an all around jobbing work in blacksmithing, and so forth?

“Will you kindly inform the thousands of wagon builders of Illinois just how many carts, wagons, and cars your wagon factory made for and sold to the contractors on the drainage canal?

“Is it not a fact that your agents solicited repairing work for your penitentiary blacksmith shop from contractors on the drainage canal?

“Will you kindly inform the public, your Excellency, just what the amount of receipts and expenditures were in connection with your wagon shop, your blacksmith shop, and your general repair shop?

“Were you not aware, Governor, that all this output of wagons, cars, barrows, etc., came in direct competition with the free and honest wagon makers and blacksmiths of Illinois?

Cooperage in the Penitentiary.

“Gov. Altgeld, is it not a fact that over 100 convicts are employed in Joliet penitentiary in making barrels, etc., —*i.e.*, in cooperage?

“Is it not a fact, Governor, that the product of cooperage in your convict institution at Joliet has increased enormously in volume since you became general manager?

Product of Knitted Goods.

“Now, your Excellency, having considered the previous questions, will you favor us with a reply to the following:

“How many convicts are engaged in the manufacture of stockings, etc.?

“What is the daily task of each?

“What do these tasks aggregate per annum in volume?

“What is the market value of the annual product in knit goods in your penitentiary?

“Where do you dispose of this product?

“What has been the increase in volume and in value of your output of convict-made knit goods?

“Where is the general agency for their sale?

“Is there any name or sign on the door?

“Governor, you are somewhat familiar with statistics as to labor and labor-saving machinery. Will you kindly draw on this knowledge to inform us how many free men and honest women are displaced by your immense penitentiary knit goods factory at Joliet?

Reed, Rattan, and Willow Work.

“Governor, you are at the head of a large institution which produces vast quantities of reed, rattan, and willow work. Last winter there occurred the greatest strike of reed, rattan, and willow-ware workers ever inaugurated in the west. The strike was against a reduction in wages. The reduction was made necessary owing to the competition of your prison-made goods, which were driving the product of free and honest wage-workers from the market. Many of the strikers were women and girls. All were poor, but honest.

“The strike caused almost untold suffering. Over 3,000 persons were affected. The strike was maintained with all the honest vigor of American manhood for months. Starvation stared hundreds in the face. The strike was lost.

“It was not the employers who defeated these poor suppliants for a living wage. It was John P. Altgeld, governor of Illinois and general manager of the Joliet penitentiary when it produced reed, rattan, and willow work aggregating hundreds of thousands of dollars annually.

“So you see, your Excellency, we, as wage-workers, are deeply interested in the manufacture of reed, rattan, and willow-ware, and respectfully request that you furnish truthful answers to the following questions:

“How many convicts are employed in Joliet penitentiary in the production of reed, rattan, and willow-ware?

“What is the annual product worth at convict market rates?

“Where do you dispose of this immense product?

“What has been the increase in volume of the product of your reed, rattan, and willow goods?

“How many free wageworkers does this deprive of the opportunity to earn a livelihood?”

“What effect has your convict-made reed, rattan, and willow goods had on wages of free labor?”

“What effect did your ruinous policy have on the great strike of reed, rattan, and willow workers last year?”

“Why is the product of your convict-made reed, rattan, and willow-ware secretly introduced into the market as the product of free labor?”

As to Prison-made Bicycles.

“Governor, is it not a well-known fact that you are even now about to close a contract with certain concerns to install an immense plant for the purpose of manufacturing bicycles and bicycle supplies? Are your plans for this plant not in the hands of architects? Is it not your intention, if elected, to put upon the markets (surreptitiously, of course) a bicycle whose running capacity will be equaled only by that of the somewhat distinguished executive of Illinois?”

Some Questions in General.

“Will you kindly inform the public at large just what class of machinery you have installed at Joliet since you became superintendent, giving number of machines, the cost of each, and its daily product?”

“Gov. Altgeld, will you kindly answer us as to the following:

“Who are the agents for the disposal of the products of your many manufacturing institutions in Joliet prison?”

“What is the salary of each?”

“Where can each be found during business hours?”

“Who selected them and who recommended them to the party or parties who selected them?”

“Are they under bond to the state of Illinois?

“Who are the sureties in the case of each?

“Now, your Excellency, all that the subscribers hereunto desire is a frank answer to the above questions, which deeply interest our respective trades and callings. We will say frankly that we have for some time been investigating the subject and have many valuable and some peculiar facts which furnish interesting reading. We lack, however, such definite information as only your Excellency, perhaps, can furnish.

“Trusting you will favor us and the public in general with a prompt and unequivocal reply to the foregoing questions, we remain your obedient servants,

“HERMAN ARNDT, broommaker.

“FRANK ELLENBURG, metal polisher.

“J. H. THIELLE, wagon builder.

“J. D. PHILLIPS, cigarmaker.

“C. FOSTER, garment worker.

“J. MURPHY, reed and rattan worker.

“WILLIAM J. CORCORAN, harnessmaker.

“SIGMUND BOTTEN, cooper.”